

Interview

On Photographing the Women of Gaza



Alicia Eler September 16, 2013



Tanya Habjouqa, from the series “Women of Gaza.” “An English literature student at the Islamic University in Gaza takes a break with fellow students. She is eager to apply her English skills and says that her dream is to travel the world. The siege on Gaza makes travel near impossible for the vast majority of Gazans.” (all images courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted)

CHICAGO — I didn’t come across [Tanya Habjouqa](#)’s photo series *Women of Gaza* underneath a sensationalized article headline about the Middle East. A friend posted one of her photos to my wall because it looked like a woman in a hijab shooting a selfie. But the tiny pink digital camera made me suspicious — the photograph doesn’t appear to be a performative, private, or semi-private moment made public. And so I emailed Tanya directly to ask if this photograph was indeed a selfie, and a fascinating conversation ensued.

Originally from Jordan, educated in the U.S. and London, and now based in East Jerusalem, Habjouqa’s series [Women of Gaza](#) is an intimate look into the world of a variety of Gazan women who continue to live their lives despite the ongoing political strife that characterizes the

region. Tanya and I talked about this body of work, which is now a part of the Boston Museum of Fine Art's permanent collection.

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***Alicia Eler:** Tell me about how you decided to create Women of Gaza. How did you find yourself in Gaza?*

Tanya Habjouqa: At the time that I went to Gaza as a freelancer, Mubarak's Egypt made it difficult to gain access from the Israeli-controlled border. After struggling with access, a friend working for an NGO gave me cover and I finally went. At that time, the media trend was focusing on a loss of women's rights under Hamas. I was curious to see how prevalent this was, and additionally why the focus was on one segment of the population (women) as opposed to an entire population affected by the siege and trauma of the December 2008 attacks.

Upon arriving and knowing I would have around two months, and never knowing if I could gain access again, I knew that I had to maximize my time. At the time — and things have changed since — Hamas was not at the top of the list of restrictions the Palestinian population of Gaza was suffering from. The siege was multifaceted, so I chose the focus on women from a different perspective than the loss of women's rights under Hamas. Instead, I explored how their lives were more broadly affected by their environment. How were women able to continue with their dreams, day to day activities, work, and care of their families in this very tense environment where their husbands could not find work, where people were still left with post-traumatic stress, where the idea of leaving was impossible? How were they living?

What I found was inspiring. It took a few visits before people would open up, but [when they did I] found the proudest, warmest, and hospitable characters would often cry. For example, a woman who had perhaps been pregnant during the siege now a young mother but who still could not get it out of her head.

There was also a hunger for communication. Young university girls would open up rather quickly about their feelings, which is not the norm in other places (including in West Bank) per say. Culturally (and I speak this as a Jordanian) there is a tendency to be warm and friendly but not share the personal with strangers. But here, there was a feeling they were trapped, there was no way out — to travel, to see, to breath. One girl (on my website with pink cell phone taking pic) within two minutes was rapidly pouring out her heart. She was studying English literature, she loved novels, dreamt of seeing Europe and the U.S., and perhaps continuing education abroad. She was excited to show off her impressive English skills. But there was always this melancholy just hanging.



Tanya Habjouqa, from the series “Women of Gaza.” “In the Gaza City home of Dr Jamal Shareef, a literature professor at Al Azhar University, his 16-year-old niece (R) shows pictures of her fiancé.”

AE: Why the focus on women of Gaza rather than men or children (non-gender specific)?

TH: By focusing on women, I gained access to all sectors of society — men and children, too — and it was quite often the women who were struggling to maintain a sense of normalcy in their disrupted lives and households.

But I saw, such as the photo you pointed out with the girl holding a pic and young girls looking on, some of the negative affects in action. The niece of a popular progressive linguistics professor, the 16-year-old was getting married. In that pic, she is showing off her engagement party pics. Her maternal uncle (professor) was saddened, as he wanted her to continue on w her high school and then university. But her father had been out of work for a few years, and the environment was just getting worse and he had other children to feed. He felt marriage would be her best opportunity in life at that time. The uncle could not counter her father’s belief. So most Gazans I met felt that women were getting married younger and younger in that climate. Which is not the norm in other parts of Palestine — education is at top priority for women of Palestine.

On a recent trip, I saw the trend of marriage had altered in one way in terms of preference. After a brief spell where the Egyptian border had eased restrictions post-Mubarak regime, the recent army coup has seen it scaled back. Also, Hamas had indeed heightened its social restrictions not only on women but across all sectors of society. Between a emboldened Hamas and closed border again with Egypt, that feeling of being trapped is heightened. Now the trend is for women to find

Palestinian men to marry who are working outside (Libya) or have the potential to study or work outside. They want out.



Tanya Habjouqa, from the series “Women of Gaza.” “High school students enjoy a field trip on the Mediterranean Sea off the Gazan coast—the ten minute boat ride an adventure as they are not allowed to travel outside of the Gazan enclave due to the siege.”

AE: The portraits in this series feel quite intimate, almost as if part of a documentary film. What was it like getting to know the subjects?

TH: Getting to know the subjects has led to some long-term friendships, maintained by Facebook. I came to befriend and stumble over my own prejudices against *niqab* (the full black covering except eyes) which is something many Palestinians and Jordanians (indeed, Levant at large) tend to look down on. They see it as other, as coming from the Gulf. There is a resentment against this being the perceived image in the West of who we are. I even had friends in the West Bank yell at me for showing any images of the women in *niqab*. However, for various socio-political-economic reasons, there are increased numbers of women doing so. They are here, and I will not ignore their presence.

What I found shattered many of my prejudices. Once I was in the house with these women, the *niqab* would come off, cackling laughter, gossip — these are women with dreams and aspirations. I came to befriend many women in *niqab*, forcing me to stumble over my own prejudices.

Some, like the one I mention in detail in the love story attached, have strong ambitions. I also encountered some amazing young academics and activists who are genuinely some of my best

friends now, whose wit and sarcasm and bravery in that environment leaves me in awe. I love shooting slowly. I will do hard news to “eat” as they say, but when it comes to places like Gaza, shooting nice and slow will yield an intimate world to you.

I also befriended activists in Gaza who in appearance were as far away from *nigab* wearers as possible. They are often hipster in appearance and pushing both political and social activism, and are against the Israeli occupation and a Hamas that is increasingly involved in infringing upon their social activities.



Tanya Habjouqa, “Gaza Beach” from the series “Women of Gaza”

AE: It is almost unimaginable to think about how, despite the violence, political strife, and the current siege happening in Gaza, that the mundane things in life still go on as usual. Some of the portraits seem like they could have happened in any city in Palestine. What made you decide to shoot everyday life here rather than, say, the destruction caused by war and bombings, or maybe men who were maimed by war?

TH: In the Occupied Palestinian territories, Gaza included, the political is always hovering. It is an invasive bedfellow. You can’t escape it. So even focusing on the seemingly mundane, like my recent Occupied Pleasures project, the occupation is there affecting movement or options or unification with family. The more overt/obvious visuals are captured with endless local and ex-pat journalists covering those elements. In some ways, those images have lost their meaning they are so ubiquitous. Now that I live in East Jerusalem and have married a Palestinian and have a child here, now more than ever I am irritated by the hackneyed images of a child throwing a stone

out of context. There is never enough political context, and the gruesome and overt signs of violence are easy. What is harder is telling the human story here. Which is why I often choose to find the “everyday” in conflict. Because this conflict is their everyday, how they continue to strive and live in normalcy and even laugh. And they do laugh at the absurdity. Palestinian black humor is untouchable and a marker of release.



Tanya Habjouqa, from the series “Women of Gaza.” “Moemen Faiz, a photographer, sits with his new wife, Deema Ayideh, at the couple’s home in Gaza. Faiz was injured during Israel’s assault on Gaza in the winter of 2008-09, and was later flown to Saudi Arabia where he received treatment. The two fell in love when Ayideh, a journalist, interviewed Faiz at the hospital, and they married soon after.”

***AE:** Will you return to Gaza and continue photographing the women? Talk about the future of this project.*

TH: I hope that I can continue to document Gaza, but in this current environment it is not likely that I will return for some time. Because I have through marriage a residency to live in Israel, I am not allowed to go and cover Gaza. Despite gaining a press card finally, and despite not having the rights of an Israeli, it is illegal for me to use the Israeli controlled crossing. And with Egypt as it is, as always, we wait it out and watch. Like eating popcorn in a movie theater. Let’s see what develops in Egypt and what that will mean for the Gazans — how easily they can enter and exit and who can come and see them.



Tanya Habjouqa, from the series “Women of Gaza.” “Young women exercise in gym, part of the women’s associations with strong religious connections becoming increasingly predominant across Gaza. With a crippled economy and government under siege—the women’s associations are offering relief to the community where others cannot—including daycare, orphan assistance, teaching of crafts, beauty salons, and spaces to exercise.”



Tanya Habjouqa, from the series “Women of Gaza.” “Deema Aydieh is determined to pursue her career in journalism, against the odds.”



Tanya Habjouqa, from the series “Women of Gaza.” “Young girl relaxes at her family farm ‘vacation’ spot on the outskirts of Gaza city. Travel is next to impossible for the majority of Gazans due to the siege, but the Palestinians remain creative and hopeful. BBQs with the family remains a top day off from school for these young girls.”



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Tanya Habjouqa, from the series “Women of Gaza.” “While these medical students at Al Azhar University of Gaza dream of furthering their studies abroad, they want to practice medicine in Gaza once qualified.”

